ENLIVENING THE SPACE

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It is 1982 and I am a 23-year-old introvert avoiding the limelight, with a dim view of the value of social discourse or eye contact. My kind of people are those who elect death before public speaking, who without flinching would prefer being in the coffin rather than giving the eulogy. As the morning sunlight sparkles through the misty kitchen window, I remind myself that I have no intention of experiencing public life or after life before sunset today.

Thankfully events and individuals who unexpectedly enter the course of our lives sometimes run counter grain to our best and worst intentions; and today is no exception. The morning is hardly done with itself and I have already been appointed the creative director of an upcoming TV and film company in Cape Town, with the producer inviting me to give an impromptu talk on the process of creative innovation.

Every pause in my delivery permeates the room with a mood of thoughtful silence… I pause often, unintentionally conjuring a confident and deliberate presence as a speaker. I am speaking off-the-cuff whereas they are taking notes. The subject is familiar to me whereas it is novel to many. I accidently drop my black flipchart pen onto the floor and pick it up slowly, unwittingly appearing self-assured, whereas my internal monologue is riddled with self-doubt and is on fire with irrational fears. Concluding my talk, completely unnerved and shaken, I can feel myself literally beginning to leave my physical body.

It is one of those classic out of body experiences you can read about; but without the road accident followed by a high-speed ambulance parting traffic, or a surgery mishap followed by defibrillators applied with sweaty hands and intense looks. No, this epiphany is arriving on the fifth floor with panoramic views of Table Mountain, while deliberating on how genuine creativity surprises the creators themselves. Ironic really. For a committed introvert this public exposure, as paltry as it is, summersaults my normal reality into another dimension.

The talk ends seamlessly and my audience, a mere handful, are leaving inspired for an upbeat day, while my experience of reality is venturing out of my body. My sense of self, the feeling of who I am, ascends and expands as I simultaneously experience myself descending into an infinitude within, and the deeper I plunge the more expansive I feel. This paradoxical inversion of my normal sense of self is both edgy and refreshing. Walking home now I am aware of two worlds concurrently and can elect which reality to focus on. My inner world is intensely vital, and feels coupled to the extensive force and wisdom of the universe, while my outer world, the asphalt sidewalk and passing traffic, is lifeless and distant from my inner being.

My biography replays as flashbacks featuring the cardinal events of my past. These cameos are experienced from the inside out, from the backstage of normal reality. Some events I had assumed were important appear incidental and others I previously considered random are pivotal. In this heightened state the images are incredibly captivating and clear. Despite reliving my life, I am relatively calm as these emotionally charged events flash before my inner eye. I am directly connected to what I experience as my essential self. Pictures from the future also appear and disappear like ephemeral images breaking on a beach and gliding into the thinness of nothing.

I am shining like a lighthouse in a profound state of peace with the world and myself. I am aglow with warmth and love, where any fear of death dissolves as my sense of connectedness amplifies. I am in a state of bliss that permeates me with a sense of well-being that is rare.

As I am approaching my gate a child, about six years old, notices me from some distance off, spontaneously lets go of her mother's hand and runs down the road towards me with a joyful smile of recognition spread across her happy face. She stops in front of me, beaming and gazing directly into my eyes. Her startled mother dashes after her, apologizing for her daughter’s unusually extroverted behavior as she takes her daughters hand and draws her away. “She is normally extremely shy with strangers, not to mention ever approaching one.” The little girl and I do not feel like strangers despite never having met before. She is open to this otherworldly reality, the world of inner light. Looking at the two of them it is evident her mother’s oblivious of what her daughter’s experiencing, or the world her daughter’s living in, the world most children are living in.

I am walking up the painted concrete steps onto my verandah and opening the green shutters leading into my lounge. *As I step across the threshold I collide with the realization that the shape of this room will diminish my expansive awareness, and radically limit my state of being.* It will stunt the subtlety of my thinking, dull my feelings and deplete my capacity to touch my humanness. The shape of the room will anesthetize the vivacity of my inner reality. This cannot be true, but this sense of being constricted is alarmingly visceral.

The intensity of this unexpected insight interrupts my sense of wellbeing. I have never thought a rectangular room with standard windows and doors can influence me so acutely. In this state of heightened awareness, it feels like I have just woken up from a life long somnambulistic dream; where I believed our buildings are benign neutral entities forming the background to our everyday lives. But the reality is our built surroundings have a significant impact on our inner development. These insights move through me without any capacity on my part to protect myself, a capacity I still need to develop.

Somewhat shaken, I am walking back out to the edge of the verandah where I can see the houses across the street and cityscape stretching out below towards the harbour. I am struggling to accept the disparity between my present state of elevated awareness and that embodied in the thousands of buildings I am looking at. Time appears suspended for a moment as the power and significance of this insight foregrounds itself.

So this is the unconscious ongoing experience we all have in regular buildings. The designing and making of a building is a process that ends when the architects and contractors leave the place, but the tangible item they have left behind initiates a further process; our ongoing internal responses and experiences in relation to them; and it is these two processes together that make up the architectural process as a whole.

Our houses are not neutral inert objects; their presence influences everyone who inhabits them. When we are inside our buildings, they are inside us, they occupy us when we occupy them, or expressed more explicitly, the consciousness implicit in the design and construction processes come to life in us when we inhabit our buildings. The end product of the design process is not the building itself, but our inner refinement as individuals influenced by our built surroundings. This the final product is never final but always under construction. This is obviously not the only presence forming and colouring our internal reality, however, our immediate everyday human-made environment cannot be ignored as an incidental influence.

I had assumed buildings should be flat sided and right angled, the global standard from farmhouses remote to city grids and skyscrapers. Looking at them now, looking at them from a future perspective, they have passed their sell by date, they have served their purpose, and have become the gravestones of the past suffocating our ability to cultivate our higher faculties of awareness and more subtle aesthetic sensibilities. *It is clear that the refinement of our higher development, as an essential aspect of our future cultural evolution, requires architecture that is different to buildings only composed of flat surfaces meeting at right angles.*

My experience is real, but my understanding is flaky. The assumption that rectangular buildings should be the norm has suddenly dissolved into air so thin I can see through it into another reality. I feel shaken yet vitalized as my being absorbs all that is coming to me from another reality… a newly experienced reality that underpins and animates the world, but is veiled from normal sensory perception.

For anyone who is experienced an epiphany, you will know the feeling of having to be inwardly resilient and literally stand firm as it rushes through you like an invisible tsunami, streaming and gushing. I am surprised at how centered I am despite facing the enormity of this insight, this gift from the flip side of normal reality. I know this timeless moment will be the inner lodestar of my future growth; the benchmark against which I will calibrate further experiences. My sense is I have been granted a preview of a state of awareness that will be common to many in the future.

After being wrapped up in an auspicious yet sobering silence, I reluctantly turn to enter the rectangular room through the shutters. Looking up as I prepare myself for a different kind of life, I notice the golden orb in the sky has deepened to crimson red as it is eclipsed by the rising horizon. Public life and after life did arrive today, uninvited but not unwelcomed.

*The big white elephant*
*Is the actual room itself*
*Did not expect that*

*The space we live in
Influences us deeply
Always expect that*

As one year breathes into the next, I veer left field having noticed an unusual light left on in the dance studio, a cobalt blue timber building set against the expanse of white snow on the far side of the park. The sounds of the snow crunching under the soles of my boots quickly fade into the distant silence of the winter evening. It is New Year’s Eve and the students have vacated the countryside campus in Järna, Sweden.

The main dance studio, a well-proportioned rectangular shape with the corners chamfered most of the way up, is shone through with an intensely luminous yet gentle silver atmosphere. I take my boots off, flick the light switch, and nothing happens. The light in the room remains vibrant. It is only now that I notice the source of the light. Through the large windows, like a radiant goddess, the full moon saturates the atmosphere with her brilliant celestial incandescence. The air is thick with planetary influence.

I have been standing quietly for some time now, motionless in the middle of the room, transfixed by the vibrant silver atmosphere reflecting off the floor and elevated timber walls. Faintly at first and gradually intensifying, like a compass needle governed by the pull of the magnetic pole, I feel my chest and body being aligned with the room’s primary axis. I am standing in the exact center of the studio with the shorter sides to my front and back.

Standing here, sensitive to everything around me, I feel a subtle urge to breathe life into the shape of the room, to push both sidewalls outwards in the middle while their corners remain fixed. To bow the sides into two gentle arcs, transforming the plan of the room into an ellipse with its narrow ends truncated. The pruned ends of the ellipse are the two original short sides of the rectangle. My sense is I would then be inwardly liberated to move in any direction without the central axis being the primary gyroscope determining my orientation. Not the same freedom as being outside in the open, because my unfettered sense of movement is in continual relationship to the room’s shape. This altered geometry would not be rigidly deterministic like its predecessor, the rectangular room.

I have seldom experienced this inward relationship to space before. Maybe it was the mood of the evening, or feeling particularly open, the time of the year, the quality of the light, or the incredible silence. Or all of these together, and some…

*The remarkable quality of being in this enlivened space is you need to hold your own center, hold your own sense of self, in contrast to a rectangular room that holds your center for you.*How you relate to your immediate surroundings is now your responsibility.This inner lucidity is subtle yet fundamental to our sense of autonomy as individuals, not only in movement but also how we experience ourselves in the world. When the forms of the room hold you inwardly you do not need to hold yourself. There is no incentive to exercise your self-determined agency as an individual. We are normally not aware of this.

The design of most buildings, with their flat walls and right-angled bias restrain us, not just in movement but also in our thinking, our emotional disposition and our sense of self. As we migrate from passively accepting who we are as a product of our past influences and circumstances, to authoring our own destiny, we are naturally attracted to architecture that reflects this inner sense of liberty.

Some of the rooms at the CDRA building are family to this kind of layout. It is not immediately obvious because when you enter the walls and ceilings do not introduce themselves with a short biographical resume of their social context and the reasons why they are there. Their influence is subtle and you will only notice this in a quiet place inside yourself.

Group processes in these spaces differ from those held in conventional rooms. This architecture encourages the participants to exercise their personal agency, not only individually but also for the group as a whole. It is not guaranteed, but the possibility of it happening is increased. It often comes about that many in the group, not only the facilitator, take responsibility for the outcome of the entire group. When the majority of the participants assume the awareness of a co-facilitator their contribution is given in the context of the group as an autonomous self-determined entity that they are jointly responsible. This quality of participation dramatically improves the health and effectiveness of the social process.

In this way the architecture emboldens everyone to inwardly co-facilitate, to be co-responsible for wellbeing and trajectory of the group. When social processes are seen in this light, it is obvious that *venues matter*.

*The central axis
Offset by the gentle curves*

*Gives us freedom*

*The groups intention
Is being forged by everyone
Given in freedom*

The long corridor slicing through the middle of the building, connecting the offices and meeting rooms on either side, terminates in a little kitchenette where Sheila makes the coffees and teas. It is the unexpected social hotspot in the building. It is in places like this that casual encounters, kitchenette conversations, turn into the kind of discussions that help to keep the organisations riggings intact, that keep the organisations rudder in hand. But Sheila is not entirely pleased about this, “My kitchen’s too small for me to work in when everyone comes here to talk. Why do they not use their big meeting rooms?”

The early CDRA offices in Cape Town are in the Old Castle Brewery building, downtown Woodstock, wedged between the railway tracks and the highway. Allan, with the consent of the board, invited me to design the new premises for this fringe community of nonconformist, who it seems, is hoping to become the alternative mainstream. They are astute and earnest. They are untangling the knots of destiny woven into the fabric of civic organizations by seeing situations in ways others might not at first. They are going for truth and authenticity in these politically troubled times.

I am looking for the footprints of CDRA’s daily practice, how they are doing what they are doing; where they are sitting or standing, who they are talking to and what they are looking at, when they are smiling...from the parking lot to the tinkering of spoons inside cups of morning coffee or afternoon tea. We are measuring office sizes, filing cabinets, ceiling heights, looking inside drawers, and asking everyone from the cleaners to the directors what they like and dislike about this place, and what their ideal scenario would be.

A question comes up during a private discussion, “Can we have a view of Table Mountain and some greenery if we are part of the liberation movement? Are we allowed to ask for this or is it self-indulgent?” Many NGO’s in these times feel they need solidarity with the disenfranchised to be relevant to the struggle for equal rights. There is a tension here between designing a sell-out to the cause or what everyone really wants: a building that unapologetically endorses their sense of self worth.

Touching the pulse of CDRA’s culture, as with any organisation, requires holding your own while marinating yourself in what is going on around you, without letting it get under your skin. Being infused with the swirl of ideas and people while remaining tethered to the thread of your own quiet inner space.

The challenge is seeing where they are now, where they want to be, and then designing for their emerging future. This approach is the antithesis of receiving the architectural brief from the directors, as a written document in a formal meeting: designing from the top down. CDRA are open to an inside out approach of harvesting their emotional tenor and aspirations, their lights and shadows, their daily rhythm, and their social and practical needs; all before the actual designing begins. It is concordant with their practice; a socially inclusive process tailored to the organisation’s uniqueness. The design sequence is similar to fashioning a garment; beginning with accurate body measurements and then feeling the texture and flexibility of the fabric as it slips between our fingertips, all before artistically draping the cloth over the mannequin, adjusting and pinning it in place before finally marking it up.

It is clearly evident after the first few days of being here that a common feature of their practice are frequent informal conversations, a colourful assortment of causeries fostering social cohesion. Usually two or three people wrapped in a cloak of attentiveness. It is here where intimate insights and feelings are shared, where the social health of both the organisation and those it serves is being kept alive.

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Wouldn’t it be ideal if these “kitchenette conversations”, if we can call them that, were sprinkled throughout the building, not with many kitchenettes cluttered with upturned cups and crumpled dishcloths, but places designed to give legitimacy to loitering. These are the places-between-places; maybe a widened staircase or passage, a window seat next to a slight level change in the floor, a semi alcove feel in reception, a courtyard bench strategically placed with a view through the big glass doors to the entrance. The building then encourages you to linger where you might otherwise not have, while talking to someone in a way that is neither too direct nor too oblique. Where you’re sitting or standing side-on, with maybe a view across a room or down an undulating passage.

This flavoring of social informality is consistent with CDRA’s practice. As spontaneous conversations are spread throughout CDRA’s daily life, so the idea is to intentionally design opportunities for chance encounters throughout the building itself. You can think of them as the shafts of light shining through a canopy of trees. We have all noticed how conversations often become keener at the half-opened door or gate. It is in these in-between places, where your back is covered and you can see around that matters of consequence often surface. Interestingly, these liminal places often alloy divergent qualities; open spaces supporting intimacy, transparency supporting privacy, distant views supporting pointed activity.

While living into everyone’s way of working and their ideals, the similarities between CDRA’s practice and mine start foregrounding themselves. They are social practitioners with a particular disposition to themselves and their work, and what I want to do for them is what they want to do for the individuals and organizations they serve. It gradually dawns on me that, *despite working in different mediums, the creative dynamics of social and architectural practitioners of a common ilk are remarkably similar, both in process and outcome*.

The process starts with listening, questioning, probing, observing carefully from different vantage points, until a picture begins to form of what is living in the organization. What is starting to emerge over time is that the rebooted CDRA building wants to replicate the transparency the organisation itself strives for. This translates as having internal windows, between offices and reception, between the green courtyard and surround rooms and passages, between small offices and social spaces, between the resource center and reception. By having consultant and director office sizes similar, their sense of equality is endorsed. Also to actively support informal meetings and ‘chance encounters’ to strengthen the internal social dynamics of the organisation so they can work through issues in one-on-on or smaller group discussion. The transition from public spaces to the places where vulnerability is more frequent is carefully punctuated in the architecture to ensure everyone feels welcomed and has a sense of where they are in the privacy gradient. And practically, to locate the admin staff near the entrance so they can see when consultants arrive and leave to encourage relationships between them where these are currently limited. And responding to their idealism the building needs to colour the atmosphere with inspiration, while establishing connections with the surrounding community by adapting to the genre of the local vernacular architecture.

The outcome of this design methodology is akin to a long-term ongoing social intervention by a facilitator. The result is a solid building that is not an unnoticed hurdle blocking the organization from finding its stride, but rather an ever-present midwife nurturing its maturing culture.

There is however one marked difference between social and architectural processes. Unlike a particular personal or social interaction that was challenging, it can for the most part be healed in the follow up interactions. When designing a building you only get one chance. The risks are higher because the social litmus test of success or failure only happens after the money is spent and the building is occupied. I am acutely aware of this and consistently feel the pressure, from the first discussion of a project with a client until the final brush stroke of paint has dried. And all this, while being aware that it is as difficult to design a social process or a building that supports health and genuine transformation, as it is easy to design something that supports antisocial-distancing and the stagnation of an organisation.

By noticing both how and where matters of importance, matters of the heart, consistently arise between us, we can recreate the subtleties of the architecture of these places to orchestrate their reoccurrence. Designing in this way anticipates our innate social need to unearth the unspoken matters living between us, to voice the latent thoughts and unexpressed emotions choreographing our relationships, and ultimately, to discover the truth of what keeps us connected to each other.

Architecture of this kind is not mute, but is an articulate and skilled facilitator, encouraging us to express our most noble individuality, our finest sensibilities and our heartfelt love as human beings. It takes delicate artistry to design social interventions or buildings that animate the deepening of our social connections, the bonds keeping us, and the interpersonal wellbeing of our organizations vital.

*The handrail spirals*

*Where the curved passage widens*

*Our heartbeat quickens*

*Sitting and talking*

*Between somewhere and sometime*

*Our hearts gently touch*

The rough sketch attached to the yellow plastic clipboard is cryptic, legible to few, done quickly in the moment, almost by chance, with numbers splashed across the page. If not transcribed soon these hieroglyphic scribbles will be an unsolvable mystery. We have been on-site for two weeks, walking around, pointing, imagining, sketching, and pegging the ground. We usually leave site in the early afternoon, just before the South wind dashes through taking the balmy mornings with it, to who knows where.

We are designing on-site, but it should also be called on-*sight*. We are standing inside an imaginary room, marked on the ground, while looking through a ‘window’ towards the trees at the bottom of the slope. “Let’s rotate this wall slightly so it is easy to see both large trees backgrounded by the rock outcrops in the morning light.”

Yes, this can be digitally replicated with 3D software, but the essence of this place, its mood, the play of the light throughout the day, the feel of the surrounding atmosphere, its uniqueness would easily be missed. The design would then be one-sidedly conceptual; an abstract idea imported wholesale, without our local experience being essential to the design. On-sight from eye level, at sitting or walking pace, is how villages and towns of old were built; they inherently belong to the geography and culture of the time they are in, home grown and deeply rooted.

Our marks on the ground have been accurately measured, surveyed, and transposed onto our site plan. We are back in the studios, having moved from on-sight to on-screen, from lived experience to imagined experience, from sense perceptions to abstract representations. The architectural drawings, the line diagrams and illusion of depth and volume on the flat screen, are useful reminders of what will happen on the ground. Our visual memory of the site is fresh so we are using the drawings as a mental cue to imagine the gently curving wall and window looking out onto the pathway rounding the rock outcrop.

The budget is clipped so we need to be artistically innovative. I have pushed the roof ridge to be eccentric to the main form on the plastercine and cardboard model. Built accurately to scale, the miniature building has suddenly become perky. Designing using a scaled physical replica of the building, is similar to designing on-site because it allows for spontaneous interventions in an on-sight way. The transition of the surfaces from flat to curving for example, is more directly and viscerally experienced than imagining a 3D form while looking at a 2D representation of it on the screen.

As I am working, I notice that the roof of the model is surprisingly dynamic despite being flat. Why does the model appear dynamic and the drawing static? It is not obvious at first, but holding the model up to the play of light and shadow, it is possible to see that the ‘flat surface’ is not actually flat but curving gently, in fact curving in two directions at the same time. It is this twisting surface that has shifted the design from dull to alluring.

When a flat surface is unexpectedly displaced, when its axis is shifted off orthogonal, or the surface warps slightly, it appears to be alive. Nature is replete with this kind of living movement. Despite the forms being motionless to the eye in the moment of seeing, we can sense its movement, its vitality. You can see this on the unfurling surfaces of a fresh leaf, or on the doubly curved body of a violin. In contrast, flat surfaces and regular geometry, like a cube, rectangle or sphere, are static. They give us a sense of being timeless, of being fixed forever. Whereas a dynamic surface participates in the immediacy of the moment, we are apprehending its process of transformation in an instant of time. *Unlike static geometry, which exists in space alone, a dynamic form appears to be present in space and time.*

In the same way as it is difficult to geometrically define a twisting surface, when social processes step into unfamiliar territory they also enjoy an edginess that is not easily defined. The vitality of the process arises through the interaction between the facilitator and the particular constellation of the group. Now, to apprehend the immediacy of a surface ‘in motion’, or to experience the shifting dynamics of a group, requires apprehending not only what is immediately visible, to see not only its appearance but also it is appearing. This means seeing something outwardly while simultaneously experiencing its vitality, its liveliness.

We are then absorbed in the particular occurrence more intensively, where it appears in the light of something deeper, more complete, and more whole.

When the building mirrors the perceptual nimbleness required of the facilitator to track and anticipate the mercurial nature of a group process, it can also awaken everyone to the immediacy of the shifting interpersonal interactions. This in contrast to boxed out buildings designed in an emotionally disengaged way, that encourage us to package ideas and social processes into neat sequences or programs, followed by prescriptive report writing templates.

*When the architectural space is enlivened, it supports the mental agility needed by the facilitator to not only hold the space for the group process, but to also intentionally enliven it.*

The stretching and movement pulsing through a creative process, as an architect and social practitioner, is between your intentions and what transpires between you and the evolving design, or you and the social process. It is here where essential and non-essential issues are initially commingled, where the known and the murky are intertwined, and there is often no easy shortcut to unraveling this convoluted mop of confusion. It can happen when you elegantly twist a surface and suddenly the remainder of the design looks unimaginative and lifeless. Or when someone voices an astute observation that without warning completely derails the growing consensus of you and the group. These ruptures in the process are exactly where clear thinking and nuanced insight are most needed to bring to light the invisible influences and authors of our past, who’s scripts we are unconsciously following. This is the nature of the artists’ journey; risking going over the edge during the creative or social process, only to discover aspects of yourself, of others and the world, that were not visible to you before.

The disciplined effort of practicing in this way tempers and awakens the perceptual faculties and inner strength needed to develop the capacity to transfigure the physical and social world into forms that awaken and elevate our inner horizons, our spiritual sensibilities. It requires enlivening the dry and predictable mechanics of the intellect with the fluidity, warmth and intentional presence of the artist. This process can bring aesthetic refinement, social wellbeing and joy to our practice. *What is common to both the architect and the social facilitator is the potential to become a social artist.*

The shape of the handmade model feels alive in my hands. Some of the spaces in the CDRA building have this quality; you might need to look obliquely. As I am leaving the studio, I shut the door and windows… do not want the model to wander off during the night.

 *The flattened surface*

*Is twisting like a river*

*Look very carefully*

*The social process*

*Is very close to its edge*

*Tread very carefully*